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Pre-Primary News Coverage of the 2016 Presidential Race: Trump's Rise, Sanders' Emergence, Clinton's Struggle

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Introduction

What's the best predictor of which candidate will win the presidential nomination? The winner of the Iowa caucus? The winner of the New Hampshire primary?

Actually neither is as good an indicator as the winner of what political scientists call "the invisible primary"—the period before a single primary or caucus vote is cast. A fast start in Iowa or New Hampshire is important. A candidate with a poor showing in both states is in trouble. Voters aren't interested, donors aren't interested, and reporters aren't interested in a candidate who finishes at the back of the pack. Yet, more often than not, the winner in Iowa has lost in New Hampshire. Since 1980, of the twelve open nominating races—those without an incumbent president seeking reelection—only Al Gore in 2000 and John Kerry in 2004 won both contests. In 1992, the eventual Democratic nominee, Bill Clinton, lost both, though he ran well enough in the two states to be seen as a viable candidate.

So, although a degree of success in Iowa and New Hampshire is important, neither contest by itself is predictive of the nominee. The better indicator of who will win the nomination is how well the candidates position themselves in the year leading up to the Iowa caucus. This period—"the invisible primary"—is when the candidates try to put in place the ingredients of a winning campaign.

Of all the indicators of success in the invisible primary, media exposure is arguably the most important. Media exposure is essential if a candidate is to rise in the polls. Absent a high poll standing, or upward momentum, it's difficult for a candidate to raise money, win endorsements, or even secure a spot in the pre-primary debates.

Some political scientists offer a different assessment of the invisible primary, arguing that high-level endorsements are the key to early success.¹ That's been true in some cases, but endorsements tend to be a trailing indicator, the result of a calculated judgment by top party leaders of a candidate's viability. Other analysts have placed money at the top.² Money is clearly important but its real value comes later in the process, when the campaign moves to Super Tuesday and the other multi-state contests where ad buys and field organization become critical.

In the early going, nothing is closer to pure gold than favorable free media exposure. It can boost a candidate's poll standing and access to money and endorsements. Above all, it bestows credibility. *New York Times* columnist Russell Baker aptly described the press as the "Great Mentioner."³ The nominating campaigns of candidates who are ignored by the media are almost certainly futile, while the campaigns of those who receive close attention get a boost. Ever

since 1972, when the nominating process was taken out of the hands of party bosses and given over to the voters in state primaries and caucuses, the press has performed the party's traditional role of screening potential presidential nominees—deciding which ones are worthy of the voters' attention. As Theodore H. White wrote in *The Making of the President, 1972*, "The power of the press is a primordial one. It determines what people will think and talk about—an authority that in other nations is reserved for tyrants, priests, parties, and mandarins."⁴

This paper evaluates news media coverage of the invisible primary phase of the 2016 presidential campaign through the lens of the election reporting of eight news outlets—CBS, Fox, the *Los Angeles Times*, NBC, *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post*.

The data were provided by Media Tenor, a firm that specializes in collecting and coding news content. Media Tenor's coding of print and television news stories is conducted by trained staff members who visually evaluate the content. Computer-based coding is less reliable and is not used in Media Tenor's research. Coding of individual actors (e.g., presidential candidates) is done on a comprehensive basis, capturing all statements of more than five lines (print) or five seconds (TV) of coverage for a given actor. Coders identify relevant themes (topics) for all actors in a given report and evaluate tone (positive or negative) on a six-point scale. These tonality ratings are then combined to classify each report for each actor as being negative, positive, or having no clear tone. Coding quality is maintained through comprehensive spot checks and inter-coder cross checks to maintain a minimum 85 percent inter-coder reliability rate.

The Republican Race

Much has been written about the role that free media played in propelling Donald Trump to the Republican nomination. His level of news coverage during the invisible primary easily outpaced that of his Republican rivals. "What I know," Ted Cruz complained, "is that the media was involved in a lovefest, giving Donald Trump two billion dollars in free media."⁵

Yet, the media have always doled out their coverage in uneven amounts. In the year leading up to the 2012 election, Mitt Romney received substantially more attention than any of his Republican rivals. In the six-month period before the Iowa caucuses, for instance, Romney got 30 percent more coverage than Newt Gingrich and eight times that of Rick Santorum.⁶

What was different about the 2016 race is that neither of the two basic indicators of news coverage would have predicted Trump's heavy coverage. Poll standing is one of these indicators. Journalists regard candidates at the top of the polls as

more newsworthy than those in the back of the pack, and invariably give them more coverage. It's a Catch-22 for a candidate who's deep in the pack. Trailing badly in the polls, a candidate has trouble getting the media's attention. But without coverage, the candidate has difficulty moving up in the polls. That was Santorum's problem in 2012. Romney was at or near the top of the polls throughout the invisible primary, buoyed by his press coverage, while Santorum sat near the bottom. A second basic indicator of press coverage during the invisible primary is the ability to raise money, which journalists view as a sign that a candidate has staying power. In the 2008 Democratic nominating contest, for example, Barack Obama was far back in the early polls but raised an astonishing \$26 million in small donations in the first quarter of 2007. His news coverage immediately increased, boosting both his poll standing and his fundraising efforts. By the time the Iowa caucus rolled around, Obama had raised \$102 million dollars, roughly what Hillary Clinton was able to raise in the pre-primary period.⁷

Neither of these indicators, however, explains Trump's coverage. When his news coverage began to shoot up, he was not high in the trial-heat polls and had raised almost no money. Upon entering the race, he stood much taller in the news than he stood in the polls.⁸ By the end of the invisible primary, he was high enough in the polls to get the coverage expected of a frontrunner. But he was lifted to that height by an unprecedented amount of free media.

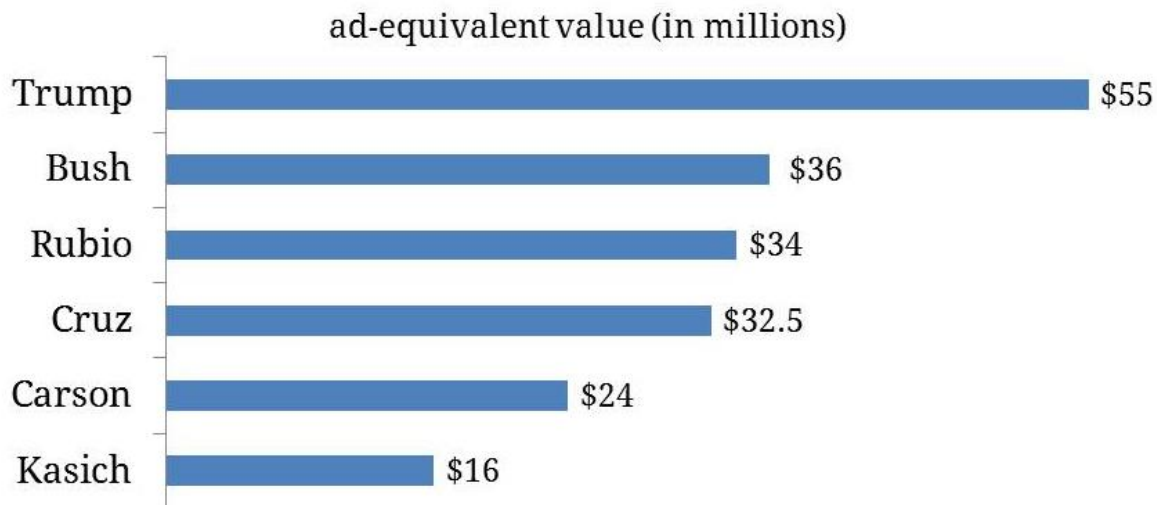
So what explains the news media's early fascination with Trump? The answer is that journalists were behaving in their normal way. Although journalists play a political brokering role in presidential primaries, their decisions are driven by news values rather than political values. Journalists are attracted to the new, the unusual, the sensational—the type of story material that will catch and hold an audience's attention. Trump fit that need as no other candidate in recent memory. Trump is arguably the first bona fide media-created presidential nominee. Although he subsequently tapped a political nerve, journalists fueled his launch.

Journalists seemed unmindful that they and not the electorate were Trump's first audience. Trump exploited their lust for riveting stories. He didn't have any other option. He had no constituency base and no claim to presidential credentials. If Trump had possessed them, his strategy could have been political suicide, which is what the press predicted as they showcased his tirades. Trump couldn't compete with the likes of Ted Cruz, Marco Rubio, or Jeb Bush on the basis of his political standing or following. The politics of outrage was his edge, and the press became his dependable if unwitting ally.

Trump's coverage was worth millions in free exposure. Figure 1 shows, for the eight U.S. news outlets in our study, the ad-equivalent dollar estimates for the top Republican contenders for the period after Trump announced his candidacy. It assumes that time on television news or space in a newspaper has the dollar

equivalent of what would be required to buy that amount of advertising time or space in the same outlet. It includes only the news coverage that was positive or neutral in tone. Positive coverage is always “good news” for a political candidate, but so, too, is neutral coverage in the pre-primary period because it elevates the candidate’s profile.

Figure 1: Ad-Equivalent Value of Republican Candidates’ Coverage



Source: Media Tenor. Based on amount of positive and neutral news coverage in eight news outlets—CBS, Fox, the *Los Angeles Times*, NBC, *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post*—for the period January 1-December 31, 2015.

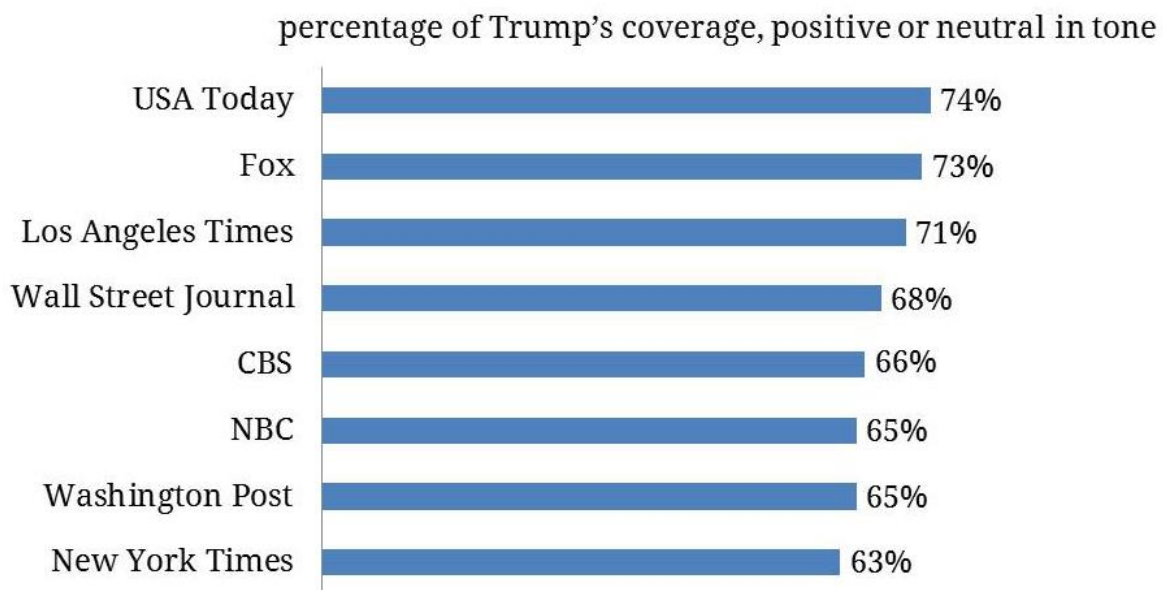
By our estimate, Trump’s coverage in the eight news outlets in our study was worth roughly \$55 million. Trump reaped \$16 million in ad-equivalent space in *The New York Times* alone, which was more than he spent on actual ad buys in all media during all of 2015. In our eight outlets, the ad-equivalent value of Trump’s coverage was more than one-and-a-half times the ad-equivalent value of Bush, Rubio, and Cruz’s coverage, more than twice that of Carson’s, and more than three times that of Kasich’s. Moreover, our analysis greatly underestimates the ad-equivalent value of Trump’s exposure in that it’s based on only eight media outlets, whereas the whole of the media world was highlighting his candidacy. Senator Cruz might well be correct in claiming that Trump’s media coverage was worth the equivalent of \$2 billion in ad buys.

When critics have accused journalists of fueling the Trump bandwagon, members of the media have offered two denials. One is that they were in watchdog mode, that Trump’s coverage was largely negative, that the “bad news” outpaced the “good news.” The second rebuttal is that the media’s role in Trump’s ascent was

the work of the cable networks—that cable was “all Trump, all the time” whereas the traditional press held back.

Neither of these claims is supported by the evidence. Figure 2 shows the news balance in Trump’s coverage during the invisible primary. As can be seen, Trump’s coverage was favorable in all of the news outlets we studied. There were differences from one outlet to the next but the range was relatively small, from a low of 63 percent positive or neutral in *The New York Times* to a high of 74 percent positive or neutral in *USA Today*. Across all the outlets, Trump’s coverage was roughly two-to-one favorable.

Figure 2: Trump’s Favorable Coverage

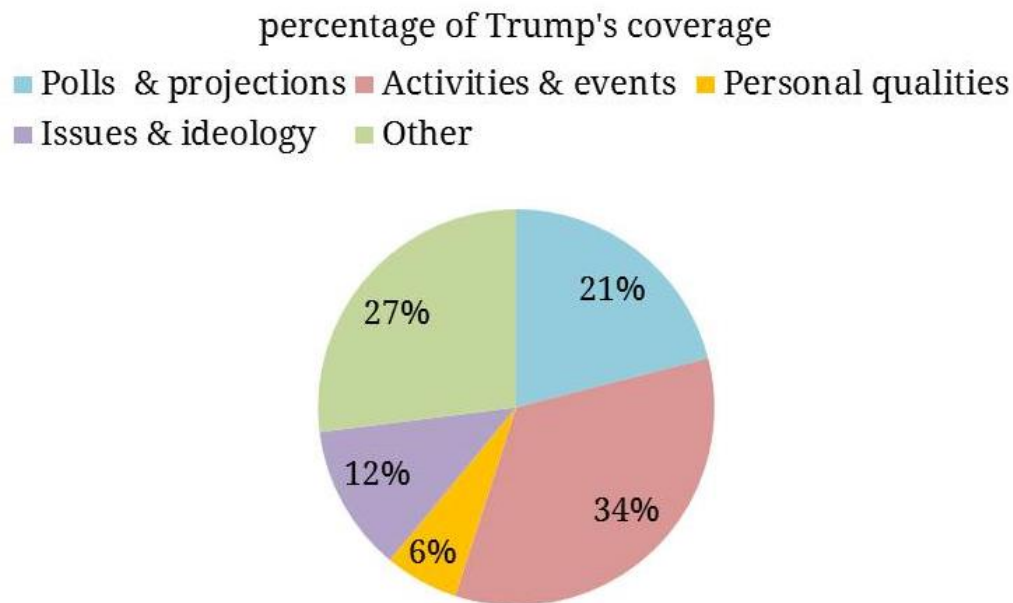


Source: Media Tenor, January 1-December 31, 2015.

Why was Trump’s coverage so favorable? Why did the watchdog press say so many positive things about Trump’s candidacy? The reason inheres in journalists’ tendency to build their narratives around the candidates’ positions in the race. This horserace focus leads them into four storylines: a candidate is “leading,” “trailing,” “gaining ground,” or “losing ground.” Of the four storylines, the most predictably positive one is that of the “gaining ground” candidate, particularly when that candidate is emerging from the back of the pack. It’s a story of growing momentum, rising poll numbers, and ever larger crowds. The storyline invariably includes negative elements, typically around the tactics that the candidate is employing in the surge to the top. But the overall media portrayal of a “gaining ground” candidate is a positive one.

The components of Trump's coverage are shown in Figure 3. Although his incendiary remarks on immigrants and other issues brought him the biggest headlines, they were the smaller part of his coverage. Only 12 percent of Trump's coverage addressed his issue stands and political beliefs. Most of what was reported about Trump was in the context of the horserace and campaign activity, and was framed around his move to the top, a positive storyline that was uninterrupted except for a brief drop in the polls following remarks that he would require all Muslims in the United States to register with the federal government.⁹ Such coverage accounted for 56 percent of Trump's coverage and, of it, 79 percent was favorable in tone. News references to Trump's poll standing ran nine-to-one in his favor.¹⁰

Figure 3: Trump's Coverage by Subject

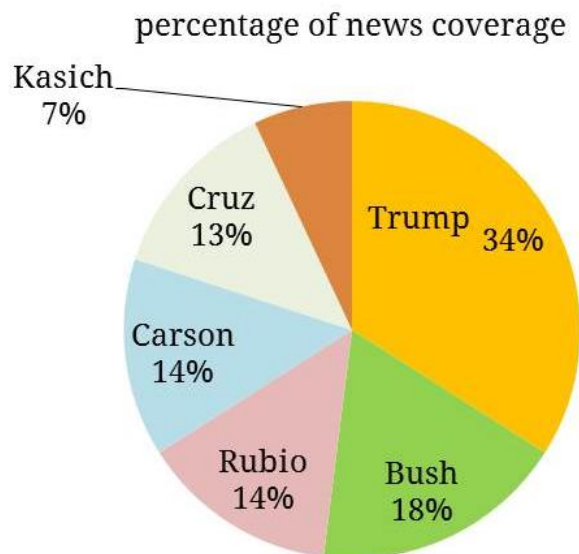


Source: Media Tenor, January 1-December 31, 2015.

Moreover, not everything that was said about Trump's personal characteristics and issue positions was negative in tone. Over 40 percent of it was positive in tone, often in the form of statements by voters who agreed with his policy positions or liked his personal style. A *Washington Post* piece, for example, quoted a Trump supporter as saying, "When Trump talks, it may not be presented in a pristine, PC way, but . . . [h]e's saying what needs to be said."¹¹ Immigration was the issue that worked most clearly in Trump's favor. Although news coverage of his position included criticisms, it was accompanied by statements of solidarity from Republicans and was framed as the issue that was propelling him upward in the polls.¹²

What about the claim that Trump’s rise was a cable-induced phenomenon—that the traditional press resisted the Trump boom? That claim, like the other one, is not backed by the evidence. Trump was big news in every outlet. From the time of his announcement of candidacy until the end of 2015, he dominated the Republican coverage. His share of the leading contenders’ coverage, summed across the news outlets we studied is shown in Figure 4. Trump received a full third of the coverage. His coverage was nearly twice that of the next most heavily covered Republican candidate, Jeb Bush. And he received two-and-a-half times the news attention afforded Marco Rubio, Ben Carson, or Ted Cruz, and five times that given John Kasich. Moreover, Trump’s share did not differ greatly from one news outlet to the next. He was by far the most heavily covered Republican candidate in each of the eight news outlets in our study.¹³

Figure 4: Coverage of Top GOP Candidates



Source: Media Tenor, June 16-December 31, 2015. Percentages based on ad-equivalent dollar exposure of each candidate for eight news outlets.

Although Trump was the primary beneficiary of the press’s tendency to portray a “gaining ground” candidate favorably, Ben Carson and Carly Fiorina had a brief taste of it. Fiorina’s burst of coverage occurred when she jumped in the polls after a much lauded debate performance in which she vividly described an undercover video that allegedly showed Planned Parenthood employees harvesting tissue from a still living fetus.¹⁴ Her news coverage doubled from its previous level but the poll surge was as fleeting as her time in the media spotlight. As she slipped in the polls, she was thrust into a storyline that’s predictably unfavorable—the story of a candidate who’s “losing ground.”

Speculation about the reason for the fall drives the story, and there's nothing positive in a narrative of that type. The decline in the candidate's fortunes, the ostensible cause of the decline, and the candidate's desperate effort to reverse the decline are the chief ingredients of the "losing ground" narrative. In Fiorina's case, journalists pointed to problems with her campaign organization, linking them to management issues that surfaced during her unsuccessful 2010 Senate bid and her rocky stint as Hewlett-Packard's chief executive. Said CNN, "Her campaign and the super PAC supporting her . . . have struggled to craft a counter narrative to the criticism."¹⁵

No candidate filled the "losing ground" storyline more snugly than did Jeb Bush. Early in 2015, he had a large lead in the polls and enjoyed corresponding favorable coverage. As his support declined, however, so did the tone of his coverage. In the first half of 2015, his coverage hovered in positive territory but, in the second half, trended downward. By December, the news of Bush was 70 percent negative—by far the most negative coverage afforded any major Republican contender at any point in the invisible primary.¹⁶ Even his deportment became a storyline. "Mr. Bush does not seem to be radiating much joy these days," said *The New York Times* in an article accompanied by a photo of a dour-looking Bush. "He said last year that he would run for president only if he could do so with a sunny spirit, but Mr. Trump, the surprise leader in the polls, has turned this summer into a miserable one for Mr. Bush."¹⁷

Several Republican candidates, including Lindsey Graham, Rick Perry, and George Pataki, languished in the near-hell storyline of "likely loser." Any such candidate in a large field of contenders is literally and figuratively damned. As Media Tenor's Racheline Maltese puts it, "Candidates who are off the media agenda eventually find themselves out of the election."¹⁸ Seen to lack newsworthiness, they are unable to get the coverage they need to move up in the race. And when they are mentioned, they are portrayed as losers, a storyline that requires reporters to explain why. All candidates have their weaknesses but, in the case of "likely losers," the weaknesses come to the fore. After Perry complained about not being included in the first prime-time presidential debate, the *Los Angeles Times* quoted Trump as saying that Perry needed to take "an IQ test" before being allowed on the debate stage, a reference accompanied by a description of Perry's mental meltdown during a 2012 Republican debate.¹⁹

Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio had the good fortune of at least being on the news media's grid. They received substantially more press attention than the virtually invisible contenders at the back of pack and twice that of John Kasich. Rubio's poll numbers stayed within the range of 5-10 percent throughout nearly the whole of 2015, good enough to mark him as a potential nominee. At no time, however, did Rubio enjoy the quick jump in the polls that would have made journalists sit up and pay close attention. Cruz's poll standing and news coverage were similar to Rubio's for most of 2015. In the last two months, however, Cruz's poll numbers began trending upward, as did his news coverage. As he rose in the

polls, his coverage became more favorable, and he ended 2015 with the most favorable balance of news for the year of any of the leading Republican contenders.²⁰ Rubio's balance was only slightly less favorable.²¹ Cruz and Rubio emerged from 2015 with a realistic possibility of winning the Republican nomination. News coverage had helped doom the chances of the other GOP candidates, save for Donald Trump.

The Democratic Race

News coverage of the Democratic race was markedly different than that of the Republican race in nearly every respect, except for the core dynamic—reporting that was rooted in news values and narrated around the horserace.

During the invisible primary period, the Democratic race got much less media attention than did the Republican race, particularly in the early phase when Hillary Clinton led Bernie Sanders by nearly 60 percentage points in the polls. By mid-summer 2015 when Clinton's lead had shrunk to roughly 40 percentage points, journalists were paying more attention to the Democratic race. By the end of the invisible primary, when Clinton's lead was down to 25 percentage points, journalists were affording the race even more coverage, though it was still playing second fiddle. Over the course of 2015, the Democratic race got less than half as much news exposure as the Republican race.²²

Less coverage of the Democratic side worked against Bernie Sanders' efforts to make inroads on Clinton's support. Sanders struggled to get badly needed press attention in the early going. With almost no money or national name recognition, he needed news coverage if he was to gain traction. His poll standing at the beginning of 2015 was barely more than that of the other lagging Democratic contenders, former Maryland Governor Martin O'Malley and former Virginia Senator Jim Webb. By summer, Sanders had emerged as Clinton's leading competitor but, even then, his coverage lagged. Not until the pre-primary debates did his coverage begin to pick up, though not at a rate close to what he needed to compensate for the early part of the year. Five Republican contenders—Trump, Bush, Cruz, Rubio, and Carson—each had more news coverage than Sanders during the invisible primary.²³ Clinton got three times more coverage than he did.²⁴

Name recognition is a key asset in the early going. Unless poll respondents know of a candidate, they're not going to choose that candidate. Out of mind translates into out of luck for a presidential hopeful in polls and in news coverage. Nor is name recognition something that can be quickly acquired. Sanders had one big advantage over some of the other no-names in recent elections. His Vermont base gave him extraordinary high name recognition—90 percent—in neighboring New Hampshire, the site of the first primary.²⁵ But even as late as August of 2015, two

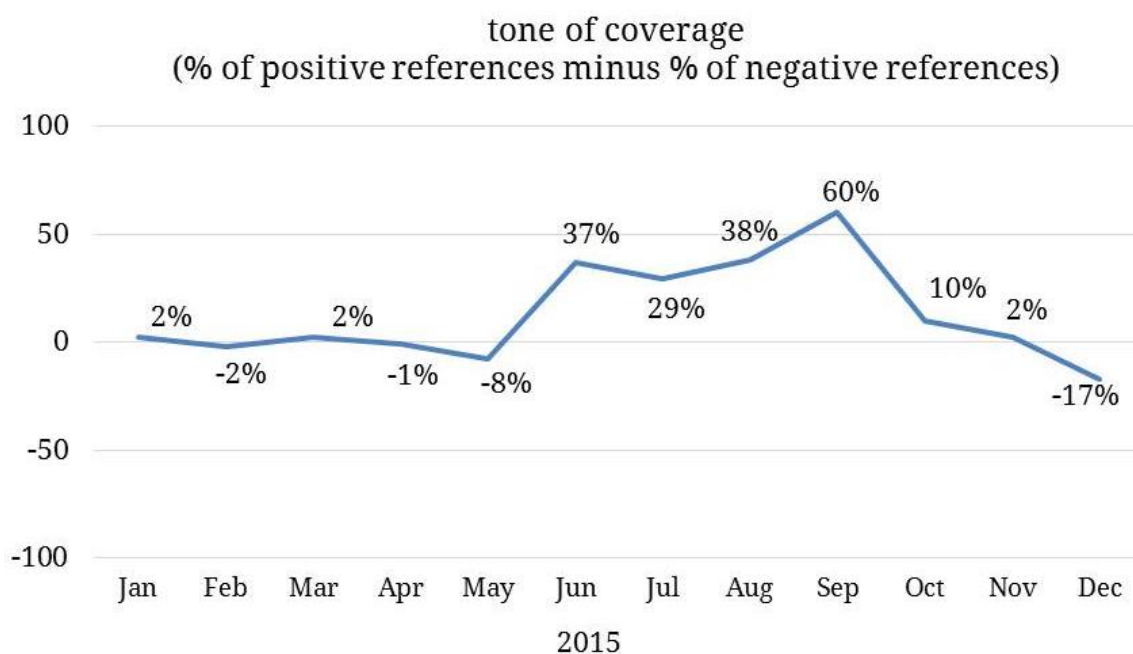
in five registered Democrats nationally said they'd never heard of Sanders or had heard so little they didn't have an opinion.²⁶

Sanders' initial poll position meant that, when he was reported in the news, the coverage was sure to have a negative component. He was in the unenviable position of a "likely loser." At the same time, his initial poll standing proved advantageous as the year unfolded. As his poll numbers ticked upward, he was portrayed as a "gaining ground" candidate, a favorable storyline buttressed by reports of increasingly large crowds and enthusiastic followers. "The overflow crowds Sanders has been drawing in Iowa and New Hampshire," said *USA Today*, "are signs that there is 'a real hunger' for a substantive discussion about Americans' economic anxieties" The "real hunger" extended also to journalists, who are drawn to a candidate who begins to make headway against an odds-on favorite. It's a David vs. Goliath story, the same story that helped propel Gary Hart's challenge to Walter Mondale in 1984 and John McCain's challenge to George W. Bush in 2000. A challenger also gives journalists what they relish most—a competitive race. "Hillary Clinton can't afford to ignore Bernie Sanders any longer," said a CNN piece. "She has a serious problem on her hands. Sanders is showing that his campaign poses a genuine threat. He is drawing massive crowds months before the caucuses and primaries begin and without much of a staff to speak of."²⁷

Strictly in terms of tonal balance—good news vs. bad news—Sanders was the most favorably reported candidate—Republican or Democratic—during the invisible primary. Figure 5 shows the month-to-month balance of Sanders' coverage excluding statements that were neutral in tone. In the first four months of 2015, befitting a "likely loser," Sanders was not getting much coverage and what little of it he got was almost evenly balanced between positive and negative. Thereafter, his coverage shot into positive territory, rising rapidly before slipping somewhat as a result of his less-than-stellar performance in the early pre-primary Democratic debates.

Sanders' issue positions also netted him positive coverage. Although they accounted for only about 7 percent of his coverage, they were a source of "good news." News statements about Sanders' stands on income inequality, the minimum wage, student debt, and trade agreements were more than three-to-one positive over negative.²⁸ That ratio far exceeded those of other top candidates, Republican or Democratic.²⁹

Figure 5: Month-to-Month Tone of Sanders' Coverage

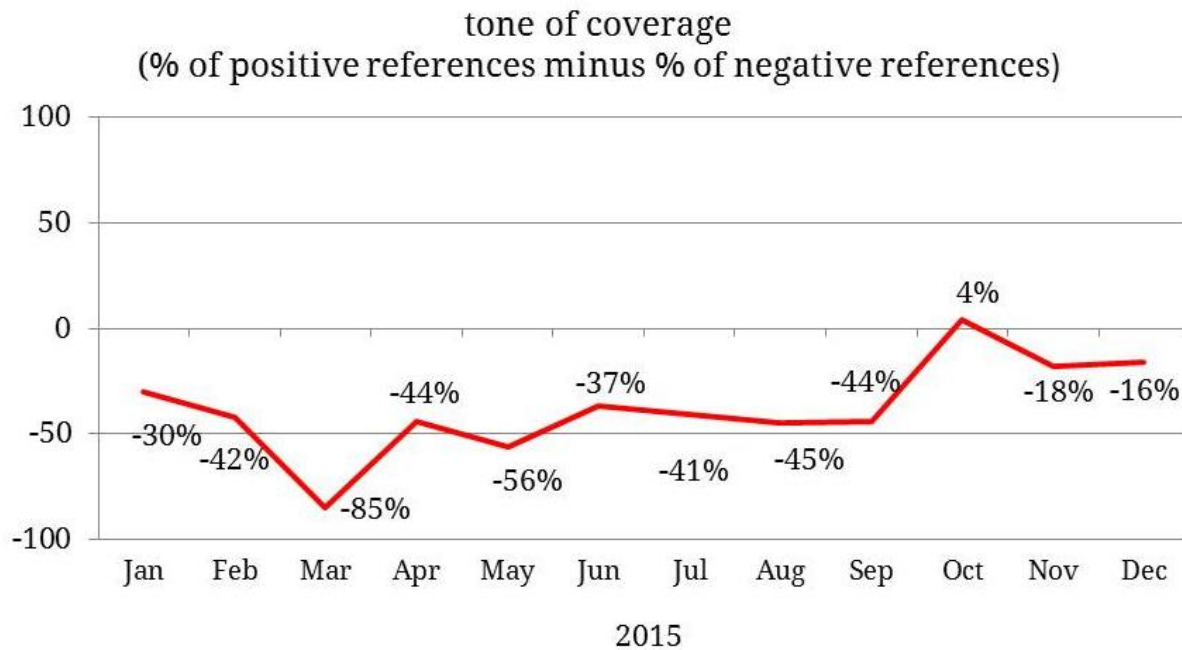


Source: Media Tenor, January 1-December 31, 2015.

Sanders' media coverage during the pre-primary period was a sore spot with his followers, who complained the media was biased against his candidacy. In relative terms at least, their complaint lacks substance. Among candidates in recent decades who entered the campaign with no money, no organization, and no national following, Sanders fared better than nearly all of them. Sanders' initial low poll numbers marked him as less newsworthy than Clinton but, as he gained strength, the news tilted in his favor. On the eve of the Iowa caucuses, Sanders had achieved what was unthinkable in early 2015. He was positioned to make a credible run at the Democratic nomination.

For her part, Clinton might have wished that the Democratic race received even less attention than it did, given that her coverage was the least favorable of the leading contenders, Democratic and Republican. Month after month, as Figure 6 indicates, her coverage was more negative than positive. There was only one month in the whole of 2015 where the tone of her coverage was not in the red and, even then, it barely touched positive territory. During the first half of the year, excluding neutral references, it averaged three to one negative statements over positive statements. Her coverage in the second half of the year was more favorable, but still damning. The ratio for that period was more than three to two negative over positive.

Figure 6: Month-to-Month Tone of Clinton's Coverage



Source: Media Tenor, January 1-December 31, 2015.

Whereas media coverage helped build up Trump, it helped tear down Clinton. Trump's positive coverage was the equivalent of millions of dollars in ad-buys in his favor, whereas Clinton's negative coverage can be equated to millions of dollars in attack ads, with her on the receiving end. Of the eight news outlets in our study, Fox News easily led the way. Clinton received 291 negative reports on Fox, compared with only 39 positive ones, most of which were in the context of poll results that showed her with a wide lead. By comparison, Sanders was the subject of 79 positive reports on Fox and 31 negative reports.³⁰ In terms of tone and volume combined, Clinton's most favorable coverage was provided by *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*, largely in the context of her poll position as the presumptive nominee. In other contexts, their coverage of Clinton, like that of the other six outlets, was more negative than positive in tone.³¹

What accounts for Clinton's negative coverage? One reason is the schizophrenic quality of journalists' coverage of a "front-running" candidate. It is the story of a candidate with a solid lead, which is the main source of the candidate's "good news." There is, however, a less positive aspect to a frontrunner's story. The candidate is typically described as overly calculating and cautious—the implication is that the candidate is withholding something from the voters. And if the frontrunner loses support in the polls—a virtual certainty given the artificial boost that comes from high name recognition in the earliest polls—the narrative tilts negative. The candidate is slipping, which cries out for an explanation of one

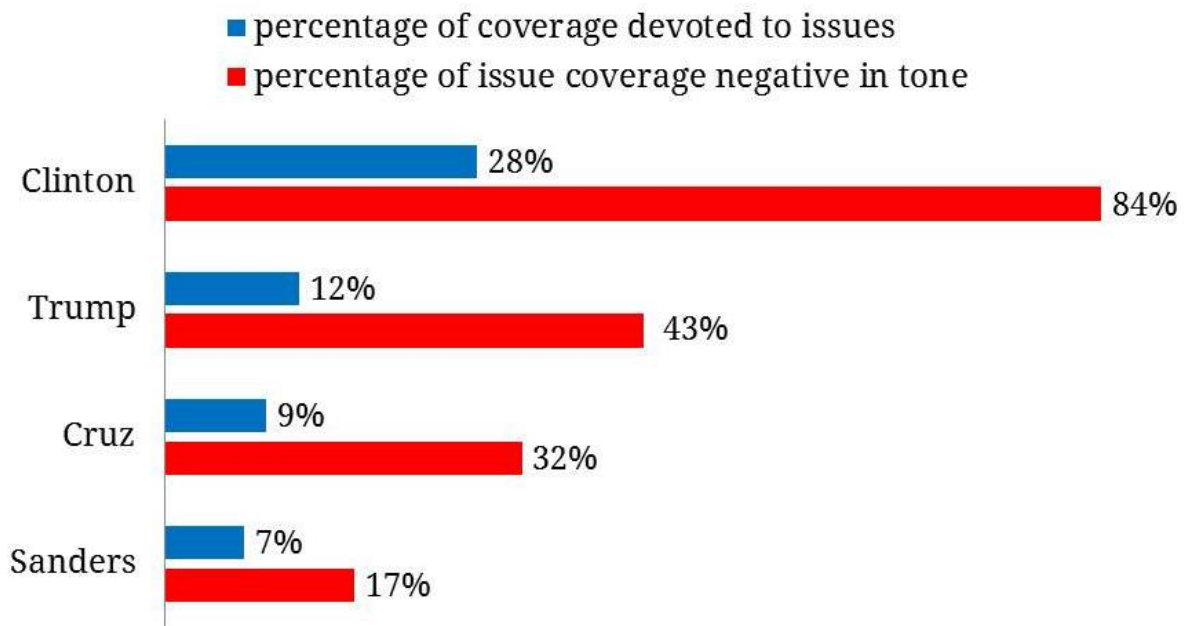
sort or another, which is always found in soft spots in the candidate's character, message, or organization and not in the vagaries of polling. A *Washington Post* report found an explanation for Clinton's slide in her campaign style: "Her efforts now are also aimed at more moderate Democrats concerned that her early pace was too placid or regal. She did little to dispel the image of privilege by spending the night of the Republican debates raising money in Hollywood and posing for a picture with reality television star Kim Kardashian."³²

The influence of polls on journalists' narratives is apparent from one of Clinton's few bright moments in 2015, a period in October when a strong performance in the first Democratic debate coupled with Vice President Joe Biden's decision not to run gave her a boost in the polls.³³ The tone of her news coverage abruptly changed. "It may be remembered as the moment when Hillary Clinton's grip on the Democratic nomination became firm," said a *USA Today* story.³⁴

Although the first pre-primary debate was a bright moment for Clinton, she was dogged throughout 2015 by "scandals" that played out repeatedly in her 2015 coverage and contributed to its negative tone. The Benghazi attacks and marital issues dating to her time as First Lady were mentioned frequently, but the primary focus was the emails sent from her private server while secretary of state. Although journalists occasionally noted that the mixing of personal and official emails was common practice in Washington, the overwhelming balance of news statements was unfavorable—a ratio of forty-five negative statements for every positive one.³⁵ Many of the negative statements came from Republican sources. CBS, for instance, quoted RNC chair Reince Priebus as saying, "With each revelation about her growing email scandal or conflicts of interest at her State Department, Hillary Clinton is getting more beatable by the day."³⁶

Figure 7 provides a summary of the tone and volume of Clinton's issue coverage, including the scandals, compared with the tone and volume of the issue coverage of Sanders, Trump, and Cruz during 2015. For those candidates, issues accounted for 12 percent or less of their total coverage and ranged from a low of 17 percent negative in Sanders' case to a high of 43 percent negative for Trump. Clinton's issue coverage was a much larger proportion of her overall coverage and was far more negative. Her issue coverage was proportionally twice that of Trump, three times that of Cruz, and four times that of Sanders. In terms of tone, it was 84 percent negative, which was twice that of Trump, two-and-two-thirds that of Cruz, and five times that of Sanders. Even the non-scandal portion of Clinton's issue coverage—what she was saying on trade, jobs, foreign policy, and the like—was reported more negatively than positively. Clinton was the only one of the major candidates whose policy platform generated an unfavorable balance of news coverage.³⁷

Figure 7: Volume and Tone of Top Candidates' Issue Coverage



Source: Media Tenor, January 1-December 31, 2015. Tone figures based on positive and negative statements only. Neutral statements are excluded.

The Clinton campaign complained that journalists were holding her to a different standard than other candidates, alleging that they have a longstanding bias against her and her husband, the former president. That's a complaint for journalists to answer, but her 2015 coverage did include more than a few anomalies. Journalists made more references to her past history than they did to those of other candidates and focused on the negative. Her successful acts as secretary of state were seldom mentioned, and her tenure in the Senate, a period where she earned praise from both sides of the aisle, was all but ignored.³⁸ Clinton's coverage during the invisible primary phase of the 2008 campaign also leaves open the question of whether journalists hold her to a different standard. According to a study by the Shorenstein Center and the Project for Excellence in Journalism, Clinton's coverage in the first months of 2007 was three-to-two negative over positive. In contrast, Obama's coverage in the same period was three-to-one positive over negative. Stated differently, of reporting that was positive or negative in tone, Obama's coverage was 75 percent positive while Clinton's was 60 percent negative.³⁹ Regina Lawrence and Melody Rose's book-length study of Clinton's 2008 campaign documented the same negative tendency in her media coverage.⁴⁰

Clinton entered 2015 as the presumptive Democratic nominee. She was still the presumptive nominee at the end of 2015, though a weakened one as she headed

into the Iowa caucuses. Over the course of the invisible primary, her unfavorable rating in national polls had climbed above 50 percent.⁴¹

The Miscast Institution?

The invisible primary is a product of the presidential nominating reform that was instituted in 1972. The reform grew out of the bitter 1968 Democratic nominating race, which was fought against the backdrop of the Vietnam War. The anti-war challenges of Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy drove President Lyndon Johnson from the race. Yet, party leaders, who controlled most of the convention delegates, picked Vice President Hubert Humphrey as the presidential nominee even though he had not entered a single primary. Insurgent Democrats were outraged, and after Humphrey narrowly lost the general election, they engineered a change in the nominating process. State parties were instructed to choose their convention delegates through either a primary election or a caucus open to all registered party voters.

The reform had obvious appeal. What could be more democratic than giving control of presidential nominations to the voters? Reformers did not foresee the extent to which the new system would be brokered by the news media and failed to account for journalists' limitations as a political intermediary. They are not in the business of sifting out candidates on the basis of their competency and platforms. They are in the business of finding good stories. Donald Trump was the mother lode. During the invisible primary, the press gave him what every candidate seeks — reams of coverage. In his case, even the media's attacks were a boon. Many Republicans dislike the press enough that its attacks on one of their own are nearly a seal of approval.

The fact that journalists respond to news values rather than political values has numerous consequences for the shape of a presidential campaign, including the policy agenda. In 2015, the condition of the nation's economy ranked high in polls as an issue of public concern, but got very little attention during the invisible primary, so little in fact that the economy was not even among the top ten subjects of news coverage.⁴² At the top were the staples of election reporting—the horserace, the candidates' strategies and tactics, the hot-button issues, the heated exchanges.

The invisible primary is the stage of the campaign where journalists have the most latitude in deciding what and who to cover. It's also the stage where the press forges its "metanarratives"—its dominant personal narratives of the leading contenders. The term was devised by former journalists Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel to describe what they saw as the tendency of reporters in the 2000 campaign to portray the party nominees in simplified terms—"Bush is dumb," "Gore is a liar." They deplored the tendency, arguing that, once a metanarrative is in place, it's hard for journalists to argue to the contrary and

equally hard for them not to play up trivial developments that align with the stereotype.⁴³

Even if metanarratives are not as self-fulfilling as Kovach and Rosenstiel suggest, there is no question that journalists create and apply them as a shorthand way to describe presidential candidates. In 2008, for example, journalists early on embraced the idea that Barack Obama represented hope and change and could deliver it through his charismatic leadership and communication skill.⁴⁴ It was a narrative that carried all the way to the November election.

Whether the metanarratives that emerged during the 2016 invisible primary will persist is a yet unanswered question but the outlines of these early narratives was unmistakable. Trump was the shoot-from-the-lip bully, given to braggadocio and insulting and outrageous comments. Yet, he also had a finger on the anger felt by many middle- and lower-class white voters. As regards Clinton, she was the candidate best prepared for the presidency as a result of her experience and detailed knowledge of policy issues. But this positive metanarrative competed with more frequently employed negative ones—that she was difficult to like, overly calculating, and hard to trust. As for Sanders, the storyline was that he means what he says—that he speaks, not from what the polls say is expedient, but from what he believes.

The candidates' metanarratives, along with the contours of the news media's 2016 election coverage, will be the subject of subsequent Shorenstein Center reports. The next report will address news coverage of the presidential primaries and caucuses.

Endnotes

¹ Marty Cohen, David Korol, Hans Noel, and John Zaller, *The Party Decides: Presidential Nominations Before and After Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

² See, for example, Michael J. Goff, *The Money Primary: The New Politics of the Early Presidential Nomination Process* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

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⁴ Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President, 1972* (New York: Bantam Books, 1973), 327.

⁵ “Full Rush Transcript: Sen. Ted Cruz, CNN Milwaukee Republican Presidential Town Hall,” CNN, March 29, 2016.

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⁶ Media Tenor. Based on 26,635 news statements in the period July 1-December 31, 2011.

⁷ Federal Election Commission 2008 election data.

⁸ Media Tenor. Based on comparison of trend lines in Gallup polls and in Media Tenor news coverage data.

⁹ Media Tenor. Based on 2,920 reports on political protagonists on 3 U.S. TV news programs and in 8 U.S. print news publications

¹⁰ Media Tenor. Based on 2,920 news reports during the period January 1-December 31, 2015.

¹¹ Jeff Guo, “The real reasons Donald Trump’s so popular — for people totally confused by it,” *The Washington Post*, December 12, 2015.

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¹² According to Media Tenor’s estimates, the immigration issue had an ad-equivalent value exceeding \$2 million in the eight news outlets included in this study.

¹³ Media Tenor. Based on 45,716 news reports during the period January 1-December 31, 2015.

¹⁴ Media Tenor. Based on 516 news reports during the period September 16-20, 2015.

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¹⁷ Jonathan Martin, “A Once-Sunny Jeb Bush, Bristling in the Long Shadow of Donald Trump,” *The New York Times*, September 2, 2015.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/03/us/politics/jeb-bush-donald-j-trump-2016-presidential-election.html>

¹⁸ Racheline Maltese, “Media Favor Cruz, Sanders as Primaries Move Forward,” Media Tenor slide, February 2, 2016.

¹⁹ Seema Mahta, “Rick Perry becomes first candidate to drop out of presidential race,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 11, 2015.

<http://www.latimes.com/nation/politics/la-na-perry-campaign-20150911-story.html>

²⁰ Media Tenor. Based on 45,716 reports on politicians on 3 U.S. TV programs and in 8 opinion-leading print media.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Media Tenor. Based on the ad-equivalent dollars of exposure in 45,716 reports on politicians on 3 U.S. TV programs and in 8 opinion-leading print media.

²³ Media Tenor. Based on 45,716 reports on politicians on 3 U.S. TV programs and in 8 opinion-leading print media.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ NBC/Marist Poll, Aug. 26-Sept. 2, 2015.

²⁶ Quinnipiac poll of registered Democrats and Democratic leaners, Aug. 20-25, 2015.

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²⁸ Media Tenor. Based on 36,000 reports on political protagonists on 3 U.S. TV news programs and in 8 U.S. print news publications.

²⁹ Media Tenor. Based on 45,716 reports on politicians on 3 U.S. TV programs and in 8 opinion-leading print media.

³⁰ Fox data provided by Media Tenor’s Racheline Maltese in email to author on May 27, 2016.

³¹ Media Tenor. Based on 45,716 reports on politicians on 3 U.S. TV programs and in 8 opinion-leading print media.

³² Anne Gearan, “Hillary Clinton starts taking some risks — and landing some punches,” *The Washington Post*, August 9, 2015.

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³³ According to a CNN poll, more than six in ten Democratic viewers thought Clinton won the first Democratic debate. In national polls, Clinton was the choice of roughly 45 percent of registered Democrats in late September, 2015 and stood at roughly 55 percent in late October polls, after the first debate, Biden’s decision not to run, and the Benghazi hearing.

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³⁹ Pew Research Center, “The Invisible Primary – Invisible No Longer,” A study by the Project for Excellence in Journalism and the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, October 29, 2007.

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